

**Texts: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13-31-35**

The picture that we have of God and Abraham's relationship is pretty straightforward. God speaks, Abraham listens. God promises, Abraham believes. God commands, Abraham obeys. God calls, Abraham follows.

There comes a point, however, when Abraham says, "Wait a minute. I have a question." In fact, our Old Testament reading from this morning includes the first time in the story of Abraham that he actually speaks back to God. I find that to be a relief. Because time and time again in the Bible, Abraham is held up as a great model of faithfulness. So I am relieved to know that he and God had this conversation.

We first meet Abraham (or Abram as he is called in this part of the story) in Genesis 12, and here is what has taken place in those prior three chapters: Abram has left his family and his father's house behind in response to God's command and God's promise of blessing. Abram and Sarai, his wife, along with their nephew Lot, have traveled all the way from Haran down into the land of Canaan, stopping at various places along the way to build altars and worship. When famine pushes them out of the Negev, in the very southernmost part of Canaan, they move even further south into Egypt, where they prospered and came back, we are told, rich in cattle and silver and gold. At a certain point Abraham and Lot realize that they cannot both graze their cattle on the same land, so Abram offers Lot the first choice of land on which to settle. Later, after Lot has been captured by an invading army, Abram goes to rescue him, and on the way back he is blessed by Melchizedek, a king and priest of the most high God. All of that in three chapters! And through all of that, Abram seems bold and courageous. He seems obedient and humble. He does what God asks of him.

**But wait. This time, when God appears to Abram in a vision, Abram does not simply listen and obey quietly. This time, he stops God with a question: How is this to be? How can you be promising me all of this when I have no son to inherit? How can you be telling me that I will be the father of a nation when I am going to be forced to adopt a slave to be my heir. What will you give me, God?"**

**I think it is a relief to know that Abram had questions. I think it is a relief to know that this man, this biblical model of faithfulness, struggled to understand what God was doing in his life.**

**Because we have questions, too. And too often, having questions is taken to be a sign that you are lacking in faith. But I believe quite the opposite. I believe that genuine struggle is a part of faith.**

**I bet that you have had questions. I imagine that you have at some point felt doubt and uncertainty over something going on in your life. Maybe it has been your job, a struggle with someone you work with, or wondering whether what you do has any impact. Maybe you have been frustrated with a relationship. Maybe it is your health, anxiety over a diagnosis, or how you will care for someone else that you love. Maybe it's concern over politics and the seemingly inability of our leaders to move past talk to action. What's going on here, God? How am I to know that you are in charge?**

**We are tempted to think of faith as silent submission, or obedience without question. But that's not what is going on with Abram at all. He clearly comes to a point where the questions loom large. He challenges God. His questioning even comes awfully close to sounding like complaining.**

**But God can take the challenge. The next thing God does is to take Abram outside and point to the night sky. God challenges Abram right back: “Go ahead and count the stars, if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have.”**

**The next verse reads: “And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” The Hebrew word that is translated as “believed” can also be translated as “trusted.” And that is what faith is: trust. Trust is about relationship, the relationship that we have with God. Does Abram have all the answers? No, and neither do we. What Abram does have, is a trusting confidence that God will be faithful through it all to the end.**

**I think a lot about Abraham and Sarah, because I think that the story we have of their life, their journey, their trust in God’s claim on their lives, shows us two human beings who struggle in many ways. Abram tries to pass Sarai off as his sister a couple of times, in order to get in good with a foreign ruler. At different times, both Abram and Sarai laugh out loud when God announces to them that they will conceive a child in their 90’s. After allowing Abraham to father a child with her servant Hagar so that he can have a son, Sarah gets jealous of the situation and mistreats Hagar and her son Ishmael. Life is complicated. There is frustration and disappointment and doubt. These biblical people, who are held up as examples of obedience and faith, turn out to be as sinfully human as you and me.**

**But what they never do is stop taking God seriously. What they never do is stop trusting that God is up to something big in their lives. Do not ever let anyone tell you that the opposite of faith is doubt. Faith and doubt do co-exist. Do not ever let anyone tell you that you must have an unquestioning faith in order to be a Christian. That is simply wishful thinking. God can handle all the questions you have. God can handle the honest**

admission that you simply don't know how this is all going to work out. God can handle the frustration, the anxiety, the uncertainty.

Our Lenten journey continues. One of the lessons of these forty days is the lesson of patience. That is also part of Abraham and Sarah's story. It's important to remember that what we read in a few chapters of Genesis took place over the course of years. Abraham and Sarah spent their lives on the road, as it were, on a journey that took them from Ur to Haran to Canaan to Egypt, and then back into the land that God had promised. Their journey took them from the despair of barrenness to the joy of childbirth. Their journey took them from obedience to frustration to covenant promise. Their faith was "road-tested." Their faith gave them perspective. Their faith encompassed all their questions and all their struggles.

Faith is not a decision that you make. Faith is not about deciding to believe something that you read or something that you are told, or something that you can see or not see. Faith is about your real life. Faith is about the experience --- the pain and the wonder, the mystery and the grace. Faith is about looking back at what has happened in your life up to this point, and realizing that God has been at work – that everything that you have done, everything you have been through, everything that has happened has brought you to this very day, this very moment. I imagine that you can think of joyful times. And I'll bet that there has also been sadness and struggle. But that is where we live – at the intersection of real life and trust in God's care.

And faith is about looking ahead, knowing that you do not know what is going to come, but trusting that God will continue to walk beside you. Like Abraham and Sarah, the questions will come. The doubts will come. But that is where we live – right here and

**right now in the uncertainty and the trust, in the confidence that God will be there at every step of the way.**